

THE LITTLE PLATOON WE BELONG TO IN SOCIETY

by
Russell Kirk

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This presentation was delivered as part of the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Man, Woman, Family: Is Society Unraveling?"

On the cover of a textbook used last year by my little daughters in their parish school, there was printed the legend, "The family does things together." Over this line appeared a picture of a family doing things together. What were they doing together? Why, they were sitting in a semicircle, watching the television set.

Were familial submission to the boob-tube the chief surviving common bond among members of the same household, then indeed society's fabric would be very nearly unravelled. For the family always has been the source and the center of community. In the phrase of Edmund Burke, the family is the origin of "the little platoon we belong to in society," and it is "the germ of public affections." The family is held together by the strongest of human bonds—by love, and by the demands of self-preservation. The family commences in *eros*, but grows into *agapo*. Its essential function is the rearing of children. Those societies of the past and the present which we call good societies have been strongly marked by powerful family ties. These have been societies possessed of a high degree of both order and freedom. Societies in which the family has been enfeebled have been disorderly and servile societies—lacking love, lacking security.

By this term "the family" I do not mean merely a household composed of man, wife, and children.

Nearly a century and a half ago, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked the tendency of Americans to think of "family" in such a reduced signification. But both the classical and the Christian understanding of "family" is larger far than this. Properly apprehended, "family" signifies many generations and connections. It extends backward to ancestors and forward to posterity.

When certain Scottish noble families say "we" of themselves, they have in mind a continuity of kin that can be traced for seven centuries, perhaps; some noble Italian families claim more than twice such a succession of generations. Indeed, a true family may be called a community of souls, comprehending not merely direct ancestors and descendants, but also a host of kin joined by the blood—or, in modern phrase, by genetic inheritance and by common obligations of loyalty. We grow from kin to kind: a true nation is a family vastly extended.

Once upon a time, the family provided much besides affection and a common domicile. It was the means for defense against sturdy beggars and masterless men, for education and training of the young, for maintaining the old and infirm, for securing material sustenance. Nowadays the family has not altogether ceased to fulfill these other functions, but the scope of these activities has been reduced—not always to the advantage of the person

im•pri•mis (im-pri' mīs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

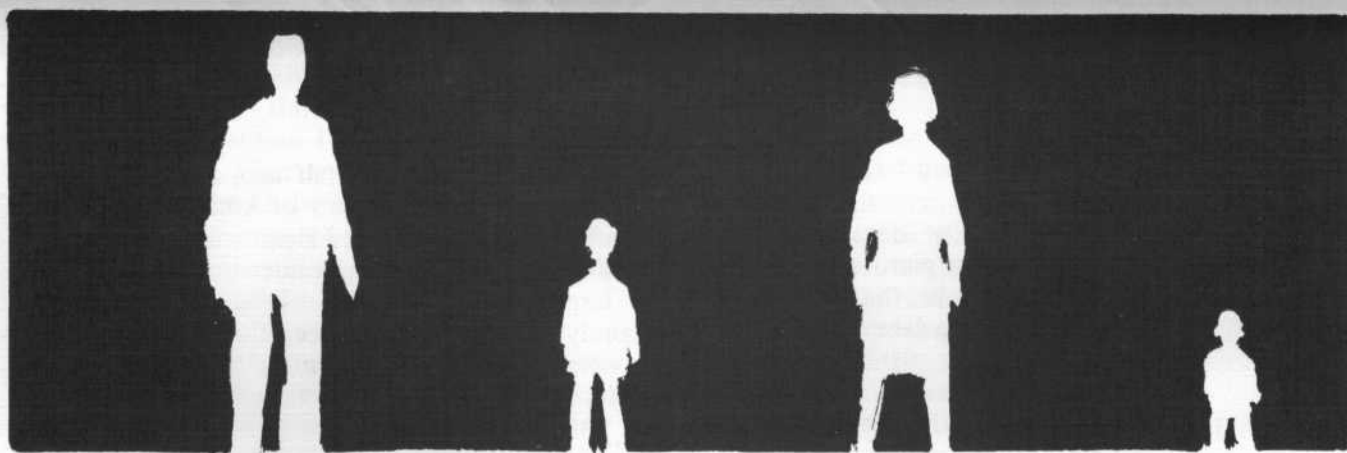
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and the republic. Should the family forfeit much of its remaining domain, or be deprived of its remaining functions, the sum of human happiness would be constricted proportionately—and we might all chant, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

For the alternative to the vigorous family is the universal orphanage. If the family disintegrates, there remain only two modes of human existence. The first of these is an atomic individualism, every man and woman isolated and self-seeking—suffering, as did Rudyard Kipling’s orangutan, from “too much ego in his cosmos.” Such loveless individualism, the delusion of the nineteenth-century rationalists, does not endure long; for, as Aristotle put it, man is a gregarious animal. We yearn to love and to be loved, to belong to something bigger than ourselves. Be-

of fictional dystopias of our century—by Aldous Huxley, by George Orwell, by Gerald Heard, by Jacquetta Hawkes. Married couples cohabitate in barracks-cells; or, if children are permitted to dwell with their parents beyond infancy, it may be because they can be useful as spies upon their elders, as in 1984. Mere production and consumption, under direction of the state apparatus, become the exclusive ends of human striving.

Such a prospective extinction of the family is not fanciful merely. It is the deliberate policy of the present Communist regimes in China and Cambodia, and the only effectual opposition to such ruinous folly in those lands comes from immemorial peasant custom. It was the design of the Bolshevik ideologues of the Russian Revolution, although the vestiges of



sides, total individualism is the negation of society. We are made for cooperation—like the hands, like the feet, Marcus Aurelius says. When we cease to cooperate, the average sensual man becomes Cain, with his hand against every man’s. In such a condition, there exists freedom of a sort, but it is what John Adams called the freedom of the wolf, as distinguished from the moral freedom of the truly human person. License of that sort, if prolonged, would put an end to the human race. So it is that if the family structure dissolves in an irresponsible solitary individualism, such a phase is adventitious and transitory merely. It is succeeded, ordinarily, by the second alternative mode.

This latter condition is compulsory collectivism. The state becomes all in all: only in its most rudimentary and deprived aspect is the family tolerated, if tolerated at all. Children become the wards of the state, reared for the state’s purposes; marriage survives simply to reduce the enervating consequences of promiscuity. That condition is described in a number

Christian ways among the Russian people have impeded the fulfillment of this aspiration. And we would be foolish to ignore a drift in what we call “the West” toward the supplanting of the family by the Universal Orphanage.

Of course the great majority of Americans desire no such revolutionary change. In the spring of this year, the General Mills Corporation published a survey entitled “Raising Children in a Changing Society,” got up for that corporation by the polling firm of Yankelovich, Skelly and White. Those pollsters divided American parents into two categories, “Traditionalists” and “New Breed.”

Neither group, this poll showed, yearns for any grand alteration of the functions and responsibilities and structure of the family. Some 57 percent of American parents were classified as Traditionalists, 43 percent as New Breed. On certain key questions concerning the family, these two classes were not far apart in their opinions. When asked whether they

would welcome more emphasis on traditional family ties, 82 percent of the Traditionalists answered in the affirmative, and 68 percent of the New Breed. When the question was put to them whether women with small children should go to work without urgent necessity, 86 percent of the Traditionalists said no, and 77 percent of the New Breed. Clearly the American public is in no mood for embracing the Universal Orphanage.

Yet White House task-forces, charitable foundations, and educational associations continue to instruct us that the American family is in an advanced state of dissolution. Usually the chief feature in such palliatives as are proposed has been some sort of new subsidy from the federal treasury—that preference for material resources over imagination which has done such mischief in our public schools. And some bold reforming spirits would go farther: they would have the state assume a good many of the functions of the family, as part of a general scheme of social reconstruction. It is worth remarking that any such grand design would require the imparting of a civil religion by the agencies of the state: but the ambitious reformers generally are silent on that point.

Evidences of such colossal plans are not difficult to gather. In various American educationist quarters, there are being discussed today plans for utilizing the public-school apparatus as a substitute for the social functions of the family—particularly since “busing” has failed to put white collars on slum children. One of the more succinct versions of this ambition was published late in 1976 in *Educator's Newsletter*, a bulletin edited from Washington but distributed from Lansing, Michigan. Mr. John Boyles, this newsletter's editor, came out for an enlarged doctrine of *in loco parentis*. Social change, he declared, has enfeebled the family. Because the American economy is entering upon a new phase—so ran his argument—children must be regarded, and reared, as public wards.

After commending the collectivist nursery schools of Eastern Europe, Boyles wrote, “There appears to be no alternative to acknowledging that we have created a way of living in which public employees will perform a significant fraction of functions traditionally left to families.” He went on to remark that “Marx, and other theoreticians of social change—Lenin, Gandhi, Mao Tse-Tung—have all spoken of the necessity for destroying the traditional fabric of family life in order to accommodate the needs of a society undergoing economic transformation.”

With seeming regret, Boyles noted that some teachers and school administrators resist new social and custodial functions for the public schools. They

cannot hold back the tide: “The day is therefore fast approaching when the schools will be acknowledged for what they are becoming: society's agreed-upon vehicle for institutionalizing social change.” He proceeded to offer details of this cheerful prospect. Here are some of Mr. Boyles' predictions for the public-school system of the near future.

At birth, all children will be registered automatically with the Community Services district in which they find themselves, and enrolled in an Infant and Child Health program.

At age two, all children will be eligible to attend standard day-care programs, part of the local school system. Incidentally, he does not mention the possible survival of any independent schools.

School-age children will attend from nine to five daily, plus optional custodial care at other hours. “Preventive medical care and immunization services will be provided at all schools as part of a comprehensive national health system.”

Schools will be integrated with other community services—that is, integrated with the enormous public welfare apparatus, which, as we all know, functions so efficiently and magnificently.

“Curriculum and programs in schools will come more and more to reflect long-range planning goals set by public bodies such as the Congress and state legislatures. Thus, if the nation adopts ‘energy conservation’ as a national goal, there may well be a federally mandated educational program (possibly including graded level components on educational television) in every public school in the nation.”

Also, I suppose—though Mr. Boyles does not suggest this—the long-range planning goals might include the imparting of such truths, in time of convenience, as “war is peace,” one of the slogans of Orwell's Ing-Soc. Boyles offers us much more of this sort of thing. Let us love Big Brother, as America's schools become “part of a comprehensive human services system which fulfills many of the functions traditionally assumed by the family.” Although Boyles does not positively assert his enthusiasm for such a grandiose development, he accepts cheerfully the Inevitability of Gradualism.

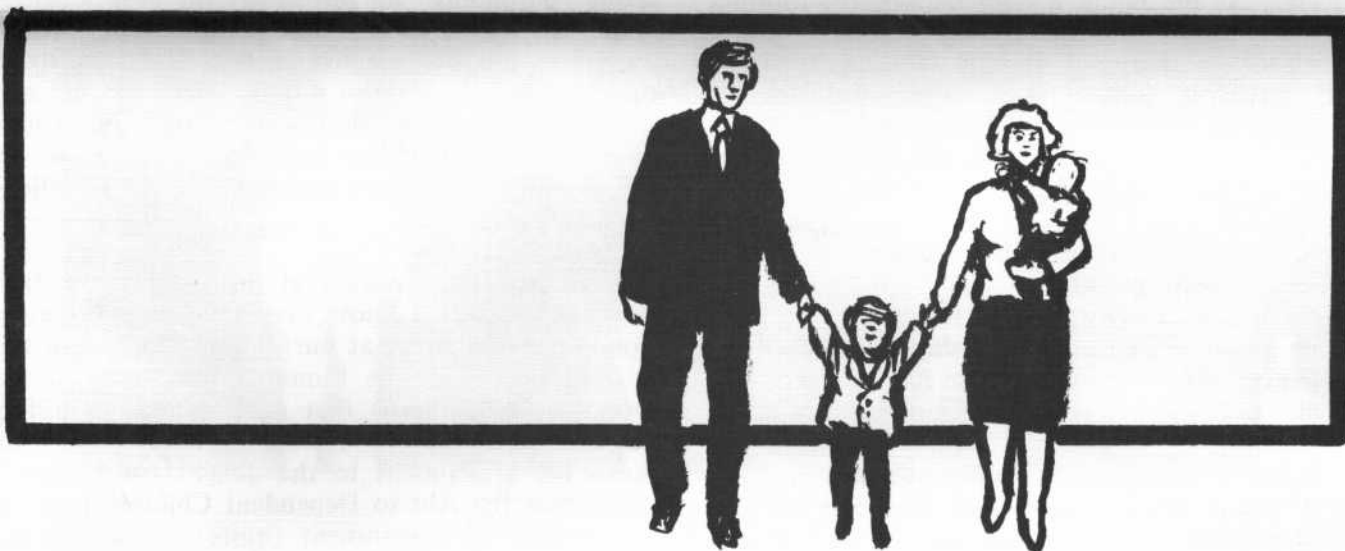
All power to the Educationists! Meanwhile, our public schools, or many of them, are centers for disorder which fail to impart even the most essential intellectual disciplines. (Michigan State University now offers remedial instruction in sixth-grade mathematics.) But thought is so painful, grand-scale action (or proposals for it) so charming!

These are not ideologues' dreams merely. A few years ago, the "baby-bin" bill sponsored principally by the gentleman now vice president of these United States was passed by both houses of the Congress, despite the forceful objections of Mr. Elliot Richardson, then Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. President Nixon was persuaded to veto that bill, I am told, only with some difficulty—it being alleged that the scheme enjoyed strong popular support. That support was not so substantial as Mr. Nixon feared, it now seems, for since then Congress has done no more in this field than to authorize and finance limited and experimental undertakings in "day-care centers."

I am not implying that under certain circumstances and in certain places, publicly-authorized day-care

One even still hears talk of "compulsory college," but this might be difficult to achieve, now that young persons of eighteen years possess the franchise. Custodians of baby-bins, at any rate, would pay their dues to the teachers' unions and provide a new crop of future pedagogues for schools of education. As for the consequences to the American family—well, we have our jobs to think of, don't we?

A second motive is humanitarian—which does not mean at all the same thing as "humane." Zealots for a perfectly egalitarian society resent the hard fact that children of intelligent and successful parents generally do well in schools—while children of another sort of parents generally do otherwise, a truth made plain by the studies of Dr. Christopher Jencks and his associates. How can we insure that



centers may not have useful functions. But the Mondale scheme, in effect, would have encouraged even affluent mothers to consign their little children to the baby-bin and spend their days at bridge-clubs. What this would have done to the rising generation in America . . . But my time is limited.

Now why is it that a congeries of educationists, politicians, and "social reform" lobbyists clearly have become eager to reduce the functions of the family and enlarge those of the nation-state? Their motives, I take it, are several.

The first and most obvious motive works upon teachers' unions and the Holy Educationist Empire generally. It is this: what with the decreasing of the American birth-rate and the shrinking of school enrollments, fewer posts for teachers and school administrators are in prospect. What to do? Why, require Education from cradle to grave; integrate Holy Education with Social Services; fetch the toddlers into the grand system of public schooling.

one child will be as good as another, or maybe a little better, so undoing the "elitist" advantages of family culture, and perhaps of genetic inheritance? Why, let us make sure that all children, from the age of two upward, will be subjected to identical training and indoctrination by the public authority, thus eliminating the early privileges of some. Would this also eliminate unusual abilities and establish general mediocrity of mind and character? Well, mediocrity is equality, isn't it? We Americans all could be dull tools together.

A third motive is fiscal. The more mothers "freed" for gainful employment, the larger the revenues collected by the state through income taxes. The proportion of women who work has increased greatly in recent years, to the advantage of IRS—and of the franchise eating-houses which now disfigure the approaches to even small towns. Why does IRS need larger revenues? Why, to pay for more Social Services, baby-bins among them. And why do more women work for pay eight hours a day? Why, for one reason,

to help pay the family's increasing taxes. Thus a circular process is set in motion. Eventually the state may find it necessary or advantageous to *require* all able-bodied mothers to work, as in Eastern Europe or in the communist lands of Asia already.

Such, incidentally, are the ambiguities of "women's liberation." Equality may become, overnight, equality in burdensome obligations, rather than in opportunities.

I am not saying that all the motives of those who would relieve the family of its obligations are base. Some are well intended: Hell, we are told, is paved with such. Yet the more the family is denied opportunity to function in its customary ways, the more the political apparatus assumes direction and control over what once were private or familial concerns. As the family's vigor decays, the footings of the civil social order are eroded—or, to use another metaphor, the fabric of society unravels. Then the state applies new compulsions to substitute for the old willing cooperation of the family: and the general decline continues. One may trace the process in Roman history.

You will have gathered that I am an unabashed reactionary defender of the family—and not of the little household merely, but of the family extended in time and extended in membership. It has been my experience that the family still can function very well indeed. Until I attained my forty-fifth year, I wandered lonely as a cloud: but then commenced my duties as *paterfamilias*, and nowadays my wife and I count about twenty-five members of our extended family in our village—not merely kith and kin by blood, but also ten Vietnamese refugees, two Ethiopian students, and a towering white-haired hobo whom we have taken off the roads. We do not seem to be disintegrating: rather, we are growing by leaps and bounds.

Thus my own experience suggests that the family, like Frodo, still lives. Sociologists and educationists naively seem to think of the Welfare Household, too often, when they tell us in mournful numbers of the approaching extinction of the family. But the typical urban Welfare Household is not a true family at all, and never was. In considerable part, the Welfare Household was produced by unimaginative public policy; and, after all, taking the country at large, the Welfare Households make up only a relatively small fraction of our population. The representative American family does not consist of a forlorn welfare mother with a half-dozen offspring dwelling in the anarchy of the South Bronx.

Because it is natural, the family is resilient, with marvellous powers of reinvigoration. A human body

unable to react is a corpse. But the family, even in lands less fortunate than ours, retains powers of reaction. In the long run, though the topless towers fall and the captains and the kings depart, two human institutions will endure in one form or another: the family and the church. In the long run, the Chinese family (the most intricately knit of all familial systems) will outlast the hideous folly of Mao; in the long run, the Russian family (rooted in Christian piety) will survive the sinking of the Gulag Archipelago. And in the long run, the American family will reassert itself, despite all the busybody endeavors to kill it with kindness.

Adversity, good for the soul, also may reinvigorate the family. A widespread longing for membership in a true family is more apparent nowadays than it was in the days of my youth. Spiritual isolation and a sterile "autonomy" do not satisfy the deep longings of human nature; while the modern state manifestly grows less and less effective in its struggle to restrain the violent, educate the young, cheer the old and sick, or even to assure sustenance. For those offices, as for love and common lodging, once more we begin to look to the little platoon. The big battalions are failing us.

I am perfectly aware that the family is in difficulties nowadays. I know that there are more abortions than live births at our national capital, in this year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and seventy-seven. I know that an Episcopalian bishop has ordained as priest a female who candidly professes her attachment to the delights of Lesbos. I know that the Aid to Dependent Children program of our federal government (quite contrary to the intention of its creators) spawns generation upon generation of fatherless children who infest the streets. I know that genetic engineers look forward to that glorious consummation when babies may be evoked from test-tubes, or cloned like so many Mickey Mouse effigies. I know that a hundred influences, many of them the by-products of our technology, try to dissuade generation from linking with generation, so that men shall be as the flies of a summer.

Yet also I am aware that human nature is a constant, and that a power of healthy reaction against the degradation of the family has not been extirpated. For love, which is stronger than death, also is stronger than the enthusiasts for copulation without population, stronger than those infinitely sad "gay" anomalies who would reject the divine gift of procreation, stronger than arid humanitarianism, stronger than the IRS computer, stronger than Caesar. And the family is the child of the fertile union of love with necessity.

Like human nature, the family always has been imperfect. Were it not, the family would be boring. So it is with society: although revolutionaries have it in their power to create a terrestrial hell, they are unable to create a terrestrial paradise. Those who aspire to dispense with the family are playing God—and remind me of the sentences of a wise woman, June Goodfield, a fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine, in her very recent book *Playing God: Genetic Engineering and the Manipulation of Life*. She is writing about DNA research, but her words about the dangers of genetic engineering apply as well to hubristic attempts to sweep aside the family, the basis of all civil social order:

“For the first time in history,” she writes, “we may have the possibility of rewriting man as we know him *out of the script altogether*. It is this which fills many of us with sadness or horror. We feel that we have neither the wisdom nor the knowledge to do this. Some of our feelings are even more prosaic. I, for one, feel reasonably content with man as he has evolved up to this time, for all his foolishness, stupidities and banalities. For each one of these, one can weigh a glory, a joy and an achievement, and at this state we might be better employed in trying to realize the potential of all people as they now are than in devoting our efforts to change man according to an ill-defined image.”

Amen to that. Nothing is, but thinking makes it so; and I remain confident that enough of us remain loyal to the old understanding of man, and of woman, and of the family, to keep the chief *personae*

from being written out of the script of the human drama.

Some timid liberal souls ask me plaintively, from time to time, “Do we dare to have children?” They mean that the time is out of joint, and that children are a bother, and it costs real money to educate them, and besides they might get into mischief, or even die before their allotted span. “To be or not to be, that is the question.”

I reply that being is better than non-being; that men and women are different, and hurrah for the difference; that all times are out of joint, and only courage sets them right; that if marriage and family are bothersome, what in life *is* worth bothering about? There remains, true, the high love of God, which is greater even than the love of created beings. But it has not been my experience that the folk who would unsex the sexes and undo the family are conspicuous for their intellectual love of God; nor do they walk in the Via Negativa.

So up the reactionaries, and let them proliferate! I hereby prophesy that we shall overcome. Overcome what? Why, overcome the death urge, the enemies of Adam and Eve, and the foul fiend. Stubborn humanity will not consent to being cloned, in future ages, from the cell of even so virtuous a public man as Walter Mondale; we will insist upon remaining our own potty little selves. And when Sodom on the Potomac is even as Nineveh and Tyre, somewhere in the Lost Nation of Hillsdale County an extended family will have begun to replenish the earth.

Center for Constructive Alternatives

The second Center for Constructive Alternatives (CCA) program for the current academic year which will be held November 13-18, will deal with energy. Participants will include:

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Policy Analyst
The Heritage Foundation

Herman Kahn
Founder and President
The Hudson Institute

Mrs. Ruth Sheldon Knowles
Author and Lecturer

Edward J. Mitchell
University of Michigan and Project Director
American Enterprise Institute
National Energy Studies

Representative David A. Stockman
Congressman
Fourth District of Michigan

Edward Teller
Nuclear Scientist

J. Frederick Weinhold
Energy Research and Development Administration